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ABSTRACT

Teachers who lead classroom discussions of gay and lesbian issues are forced to confront their deepest feelings about sexuality and prejudice, a confrontation that many find uncomfortable for a number of reasons. They not only face the possibility that the discussion will turn negative but they also fear they will lose control of the situation. A student activity called "Privileges," which asks students to consider how specific loss of privilege would affect their lives, provides relief for this stressful situation and has proved to be effective in: (1) increasing student sensitivity to gay and lesbian concerns; (2) in helping make students aware of the numbers of people involved in these issues; and (3) in encouraging students to evaluate their own ethnocentric attitudes. In the activity, each person receives a different card designed to represent prejudice, but is unaware of the source of the prejudice until receiving a second card to tell him or her whether he or she is gay or straight. (NH)

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"Privileges": A Student Activity Designed to Increase Interpersonal Communication Competence Regarding Gay and Lesbian Concerns

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A paper presented at the 79th Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Miami Beach, November 18, 1993.

Abstract: This paper provides a classroom activity for use in teaching interpersonal communication competency. Objectives are: (a) to increase student sensitivity to gay and lesbian concerns, (b) to make students aware of the numbers of people affected by these issues, (c) to encourage students to evaluate their own ethnocentric attitudes.

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Author Identification: Joan E. Aitken is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Missouri--Kansas City, 64110-2499. She expresses her appreciation to Mark Anderson for assistance in preparation of the paper. This learning activity will appear in an instructor's manual for a new culturally-sensitive interpersonal communication textbook: Berko, R.M., Rosenfeld, L.B., & Samovar, L.A. (1994). Connecting: A culture-sensitive approach to interpersonal communication competency. Fort Worth: Harcourt-Brace.

"Privileges": A Student Activity Designed to Increase Interpersonal Communication Sensitivity Regarding Gay and Lesbian Concerns

This paper is not like ones I have given at Speech Communication Association meetings in the past. There is no survey of the literature. There is no hypothesis. There is no neat and orderly progression through the scientific method. There is not even a scholarly style. This paper is about my personal growth process in learning about gay and lesbian concerns and establishing a valid classroom climate for integrating gay and lesbian thinking into an interpersonal communication course.

I recently was asked to provide an instructor's manual for a textbook designed to be culturally sensitive. What a great project. I consider myself a creative teacher who is culturally sensitive. My work was progressing nicely until the day I realized that I needed to create at least one activity to deal with gay and lesbian concerns. Now here is where I become overly culturally sensitive. I have tried talking about gay and lesbian issues in class, but on more than one occasion, I felt like I lost control of the discussion when it turned negative. I have tried cutting off derogatory comments in class, but I usually act defensively. True, I have taught communication for 20 years, but there is still certain things I just never am comfortable discussing. I am still learning how to discuss some issues.

I avoided discussing gay and lesbian issues in the classroom for a long time. There are some "good" reasons why, which may be helpful in understanding how to help straight teachers to learn sensitivity regarding issues of sexual orientation. First, gay and lesbian issues seem to involve the last bastion of acceptable prejudice in our society. To discuss them, one must confront ones deepest feelings about sexuality and prejudice. Neither type of personal confrontation is comfortable for most people to discuss anywhere, not to mention in the classroom. Second, I believe that I know too little about gay and lesbian concerns. In reality, since my brother-in-law told me he is gay, I have learned much. I have read. I have attended Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gay (PFLAG) meetings. I have made friends and learned more about friends I already had. And these people have forced me to face reality. Third, I do not have tenure, which is an easy--and somewhat valid--excuse to avoid any controversial topic. I finally decided that if my university has a negative attitude about openness and tolerance, this school is not where I want tenure. So, here I am. The time has come. What activity could I create for this culturally-sensitive book? For my class? Could I create an activity that might make a difference for my students and me. Do I have the character to discuss sexuality and prejudice publicly?

Attached is the activity I developed. Each person receives a different card designed to represent prejudice.

The students are unaware of the source of the prejudice, until they receive a second card tell them they are gay or straight. The prejudices were based on a list from PFLAG.

The day that I introduced the exercise in a junior-level interpersonal communication class, I felt quite nervous. I had never confronted the issue in the class in such a way, and literally, my hands shook as I held the cards. The students responded to the cards with an immediate serious tone, and a quiet, contemplative nature. When it came time for discussion after the activity, several students spoke up, and a variety of opinions were expressed. Tolerance of different points of view was the norm by this point. Student empathy for gay and lesbian

At the end of the semester, I had the class divided into two groups--half the class meeting one day and the other half meeting the next day--for a discussion and evaluation of the course. This learning activity came up in both classes. One student wanted more discussion, but others had nothing to say. One man said he was shocked by the exercise, not by the content, but shocked by the magnitude of discrimination. He needed time to think, and had no desire to talk. In the student final exam, I required that they write a letter to themselves about what they learned in the course. I mail the letter to them at a later time, usually years later. In her letter to herself, one woman wrote:

"The most important thing I learned from peers in my class was to be able to look about people and events in the

world from different points of view. One day we had a discussion about gays. I never personally knew any, except for the people I saw in public. But people in the class that actually had personal contact with them saw them in a different light than my narrow perception would allow me to. I could respect others' views of people and events more after I thought about it for awhile. I learned that my personal biases and stereotypes weren't warranted."

Privileges*

Objectives: (a) to increase student sensitivity to gay and lesbian concerns, (b) to help make students aware of the numbers of people involved in these issues, (c) to encourage students to evaluate their own ethnocentric attitudes.

To instructor:

You may want to avoid explaining the purpose of the activity beforehand so that you receive different perceptions. If so, you can explain the purpose after students have discussed the activity.

Below are 30 statements. You may add or delete statements so that you have the right number for one per student. Cut the statements apart and give one to each student. Have each student discuss the impact of the statement (either as an entire class or in small groups).

Part A: How Does Loss of Privilege Affect You?

Oral instructions to students:

Imagine that the information on your card now applies to you. Each person has something different. This happens to you--not by choice--but because society forces you. You have no ability to affect change.

Questions to consider:

1. How does the card make you feel?

2. What are the implications of the card?

3. How might it affect your communication? Your self-esteem? Your personal and professional goals? Your relationships?

First set of cards:

1. You make a lifelong commitment to your spouse, but cannot have public recognition or support for your relationship (no cards, no phone calls celebrating your commitments to the person, no supporting activities, no social expectations that you will live in a long, healthy, stable, or committed relationships).

2. You have a child, but have no legal custody. Only your spouse is considered the legal parent.

3. Your spouse dies. You cannot have paid leave from employment when grieving the death of your spouse. You risk losing your job if you take off any time from work, even to arrange the funeral.

4. You and your spouse have no protection under property laws. You cannot file joint tax returns. There is no automatic inheritance from your spouse under probate laws.

5. You and your spouse cannot share health, auto, or homeowner's insurance policies at reduced rates because you are married. You need separate insurance on everything.

6. There is no immediate access to your spouse in case of accident or emergency. In fact, other people are called--not you--and you may be kept away.

7. Your family-of-origin disapproves of your marriage. In addition, you are afraid to tell them that you are married and starting a new life. You keep the marriage a secret.

8. Despite your desire to do so, the government prohibits you from marrying your love.

9. You question your normalcy because you find no role models who are people like you.

10. You question your sexuality because of what you learn about romance and relationships from fiction, movies, media, and television. Virtually everything positive you see in media is opposite of your sexuality.

11. You question your cultural integrity because you fail to see any positive media images of people with whom you can identify. You perceive yourself as a cultural outcast.

12. You are afraid to live with your spouse because of what people in your society might do to you or your spouse (fear of verbal abuse, physical abuse, even death).

13. You are afraid to talk about your spouse. You cannot discuss projects, vacations, or family plans with anyone outside your immediate family (not to extended family, co-workers, neighbors, or your religious community).

14. When you and your spouse divorce, you cannot tell anyone. You cannot express your pain to family, coworkers, or friends. You cannot let anyone see your agony. No one knows that the divorce has happened.

15. When your spouse dies, you cannot tell anyone. You cannot express you pain. You cannot let anyone see you are in pain. No one acknowledges that the death has happened.

16. You fail to be socially acceptable to your neighbors, colleagues, or even friends.

17. You are prohibited from dating anyone you like so long as you are a teenager.

18. You must hide and lie about social activities in which you engage.

19. You are constantly labeled and stereotyped because of just one aspect of yourself.

20. Despite your education, skills, and potential, you have reduced employment opportunities and less chance of finding or keeping a job, receiving on-the-job training, or being promoted.

21. You do an excellent job at work. You are considered a success and have an excellent position, for which you worked hard. Unfortunately, you are fired for reasons unrelated to your quality job performance.

22. You are forbidden from being a leader of any kind in your religious group. In fact, you may be banned from attending their functions. Because they care about you, your friends are banned too.

23. You want to teach, but are forbidden from being a teacher in pre-school through high school because people assume you will corrupt children.

24. You love children but are unable to have any of your own. Your local social service agencies automatically prohibit you from adopting children or fosterparenting children.

25. You have your own children and are able to meet their emotional and physical needs. Despite being a loving parent, you are under constant threat that the state will intervene.

26. Your children mean the world to you and you don't want to hurt them. Sometimes, however, their friends reject your kids when they find out you are the parent.

27. Despite your desire to serve in the military, you must keep secret key aspects of who you.

28. You are close to your parents, but you are afraid to discuss anything about yourself other than your employment.

29. You must constantly be on guard not to express yourself, to watch what you say to whom. You cannot reveal important things about your life to anyone.

30. You feel like a good, caring, intelligent, educated person. You are, however, an outcast.

31. As a teenager, you contemplated suicide because you thought you would never fit into society. Now as an adult, you are more likely to have physical and mental health problems because of the stress of who you are.

32. You parents don't approve of you, and they kicked you out of the house.

33. You are evicted from your apartment. You thought you were a good neighbor, but someone in the building didn't like your presence. You have no legal recourse.

Instructor's oral comments to students (after receiving the cards):

As you think about your card, you probably wonder the cause of your situation. Consider number 26, for example. "Your children mean the world to you and you don't want to hurt them. Sometimes, however, their friends reject your kids when they find out you are the parent." This might happen to the parent in a biracial couple, for example.

Consider number 7. "Your family-of-origin disapproves of your marriage. In addition, you are afraid to tell them that you are married and starting a new life. You keep the marriage a secret." You can imagine this situation, for example, when strong ethnic or religious values prohibit mixing groups.

Consider number 16. "You are not socially acceptable to your neighbors, colleagues, or even friends." What would cause such rejection? Can you think of anything that might make everyone you know to turn against you? Anything short of murder, for example?

Part B: Whom Do You Represent?

Now, I have a second set of cards for you. I want you to read the cards to yourself, but do not discuss the content with anyone. (Instructor should mark # 10, #20, and #30 with a color so everyone can see they are different).

Second set of cards:

1. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

2. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

3. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

4. You are straight, but you have a lesbian cousin. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card. Remember, though, the situation may affect someone you love.

5. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

6. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

7. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

8. You are straight, but your favorite uncle is gay. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person

with a colored card. Remember, though, the situation may affect someone you love.

9. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

10. (Colored Card) You are a lesbian or gay man. You will be collecting cards now.

11. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

12. You are straight, but your sister is lesbian. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card. Remember, though, the situation may affect someone you love.

13. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

14. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

15. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

16. You are straight, but your father is gay. You never realized it before now. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card. Remember, though, the situation may affect someone you love.

17. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

18. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

19. You are straight, but your child is not. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card. Remember, though, the situation may affect someone you love.

20. (Colored Card) You are a lesbian woman or a gay man. You will be collecting cards now.

21. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

22. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

23. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

24. You are straight, but your brother-in-law is gay. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card. Remember, though, the situation may affect someone you love.

25. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

26. You are straight, but the person you plan to marry is not. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

27, You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

28. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

29. You are straight, but you find out your grandfather is not. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card. Remember, though, the situation may affect someone you love.

30. (Colored Card) You are a lesbian woman or a gay man. You will be collecting cards now.

31. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

32. You are straight. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card.

33. You are straight, but your niece is not. Your first card no longer applies to you. Give it to a person with a colored card. Remember, though, the situation may affect someone you love.

Instructor's oral comments to students (after students give away cards):

Are you getting the idea, now? Consider the implications of these statements. The people with colored cards need to read aloud the statements given to them from the first set of cards. These cards were based on an article originally published by Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG, Lacy, 1992) about the privileges that heterosexual people enjoy which society withholds from people who are homosexual. Each of the first group of cards represents a problem that lesbian women and gay men may have simply because of our society's prejudices. As the article says, most heterosexuals live "without ever having to think twice, face, confront, engage, or cope with" (p. 4) any of the issues on the first set of cards.

Estimates suggest that one in 10 people in our society are gay or lesbian, and that one in four people have a homosexual family member. You have figured out by now that the students with colored cards represent the homosexual population. Please raise your hand if your second card designated you to represent a relative of a person who is homosexual. Only some of you may actually know that your loved one is homosexual. Some of you don't have a clue. Your family member might be a parent, a child (yes, even of two straight parents), a brother, a sister, an in-law, a cousin, an aunt or uncle, a grandparent, even a spouse. Those who deny the possibility are the ones likely to avoid

facing the reality in their own families. It is like when Oprah calls someone "Queen of De Nial." The scientific research suggests that our sexuality--whether we are gay, straight, or bisexual--is determined by complex factors over which we have no control.

Questions for further discussion:

1. We can assume that any derogatory comments about one's loved ones will affect people adversely. With one in four people having a homosexual family member, how might that affect our communication with others?
2. What is the cause of prejudices perpetuated by our society?
3. How might our prejudices affect our interaction with our extended family? Our neighbors? Our good friends? Our co-workers? People in groups to which we belong (religious, social, service)?
4. Why is it so difficult to face one's own prejudices?
5. Why is there such a taboo about the discussion of sexuality?
6. How does the concept of ethnocentrism fit regarding co-cultures?

*Based on article originally published by PFLAG, reprinted by Lacey, J. (1992, Winter). Consider: What is heterosexual privilege? Crossbeams, (22), p. 4. Books that may be good resources for the classroom: Can Homophobia Be Cured?

(Bruce Hilton), Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism (Suzanne Pharr) and Homophobia: How We All Pay the Price (by Warren Blumenfeld).